PEOPLE LOVE DEAD JEWS
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No more than 36 hours after our friend and colleague, Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker escape an armed terrorist with 2 members of his congregation from a sanctuary very much like this one I got a call from CBC News.

They asked if I could do a TV interview via zoom; they wanted to get my reaction to the news. I was not surprised by the call; in fact I was hoping for it; I wanted to talk about Texas and my colleague, his heroism and our communal trauma of having three attacks with guns on Jews at prayer in a synagogue in less than 5 years. Far more if you count street violence and vandalism.

The reporter came on the phone and asked her first question, “What did I think of the news that Anne Frank and her family were turned in by a fellow Jew as had been reported in a new book out this week?”

“Anne Frank? Anne Frank?, you want to talk about Anne Frank? Why do we need to talk about antisemitism that happened 70 years ago in Europe when we can talk about what happened less than 2 days ago in Texas?”

So many thoughts in my head, too many thoughts. The first was the title of Dara Horn’s award winning book, “People Love Dead Jews”. Of course the CBC wants to talk about Anne Frank, Anne and almost her entire family died. People love talking about dead Jews.

Horn, whose book by that title just won the national Jewish Book award, has been writing essays about Jews and the Jewish community for decades. The title of her book comes from her troubling realization that what all of these assignments had in common: was that she was being asked to write about dead Jews, never about living ones.

In her book Horn explores the not so shocking attacks on the American Jewish community in recent years, to which we can now add Colleyville TX to the list. She reveals the subtler dehumanization built into the public piety that surrounds the Jewish past, from which this Anne Frank question clearly derives.

Horn’s main insight is that much of the way we’ve developed to remember and narrate Jewish history is, at best, self-deception. The 12 essays in her brilliant book explore how the different ways we commemorate Jewish tragedy, how we write about the Holocaust, how the media presents antisemitic events, how we establish museums to honour Jewish heritage, how we read literature with Jewish protagonists and even how we praise the “righteous among the nations” (those who saved Jews during the war), are all distractions from the main issue, which is the very concrete, specific death of Jews.

Of course they wanted to talk about Anne Frank, the Jews in Texas miraculously survived, where is the story in that?

The other reason I hazard to guess is that the revelation that it was a fellow Jew who turned in Frank and other families in hiding to save his own family from the gas chambers absolves the non-Jewish world of accountability for the murder of this bright eyed teenage Jewish girl who inspired the world with her diary and perhaps its most famous, most quoted sentence — “I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart”. Considering how things ended for Anne, we find it astounding that she’s still able to believe in people’s essential goodness.

But here is Horn’s straightforward response: “It is far more gratifying to believe that an innocent dead girl has offered us grace than to recognize the obvious: Frank wrote about people being ‘truly good at heart’ before meeting people who weren’t. Three weeks after writing those words, she met people who weren’t.”

The ways we remember are inextricable from the way we relate to what is happening today. Horn claims that setting the Holocaust as the bar for anti-Semitism means that “anything short of the Holocaust is, well, not the Holocaust. The bar is rather high.” According to Horn, this might explain the limited shelf life, so to speak, of current events like the gunning down of Jews in Pittsburgh, in San Diego, in New Jersey and the hostage taking in Texas.

It shouldn’t shock me, but it still does that people don’t want to talk about antisemitism; if it’s not the Holocaust it doesn’t count.

I know that is a bold and audacious statement but let’s unpack the events of these past few years. Let’s start with Texas you would think Jew Hatred could not be a more obvious cause for pointing a gun at my colleague and his congregants but in the first press conference after the daring escape F.B.I. special agent in charge, Matthew DeSarno, said, “[the perpetrator], was singularly focused on one issue, and it was not specifically related to the Jewish community, but we are continuing to work to find motive,”

Both The Associated Press and the BBC parroted the line, with the BBC tweeting, “Texas synagogue hostage standoff not related to Jewish community — F.B.I.” They all later changed their story but the first headline; the first inclination was to deny that an attack on Jews in a synagogue had anything to do with them being Jews.

Brett Stephens in today’s NY Times observes.
“Instead, there was a focus on the assailant’s supposed mental illness, along with additional reporting on the ever-increasing security-consciousness of synagogues worldwide.

Compare that to the mountain of reporting regarding the anti-Asian hate that allegedly animated the killer in last year’s attacks on Atlanta-area massage parlors. Or compare it to the coverage of the unquestionably racist attack on Muslim worshipers at the mosque in Quebec City. For that

matter, compare it to the naked Jew-hatred that drove the killer in the 2018 synagogue massacre in Pittsburgh, which has been extensively reported and discussed; but then again to quote Dara Horn, “people love dead Jews.”

Stephens asks and I echo his question, “How is it that Jews should be victimized twice? First, by being physically targeted for being Jewish; second, by being begrudged the universal recognition that we were morally targeted, too? And how can it be that in this era of heightened sensitivity to every kind of hatred, bias, stereotype, -ism and -phobia, both conscious and unconscious, there’s so much caviling, caveating and outright denying when it comes to calling out bias aimed at Jews?”

The answer begins with the shapeshifting nature of antisemitism, which some perpetrate, others participate in (sometimes unwittingly), and a still greater number fail to recognize for what it is — in part because each successive mutation doesn’t exactly resemble its predecessor.

But it’s more than that. At the core of antisemitism from the days of blood libels and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion is a conspiracy theory that Jews are all powerful, that we control the banks, the media and in the mind of the Texas terrorist the US Government. Such unhinged and corrosive conspiracy theories are demonstratively dangerious as has been the history of our people.

Again Brett Stephens observes, “A moral conviction of our time… is that the powerful are presumptively bad while the powerless are presumptively good.”

So the image of a British Muslim of Pakistani descent. Not white. Not privileged. Not right-wing. In the binary narrative of the powerful versus the powerless, his naked antisemitism just doesn’t compute: Powerless people are supposed to be victims, not murderous bigots.

But if Jews are all powerful as the troupe goes then everyone is powerless in the face of them and thus on some deranged and absurd level attacks on Jews are justified as a rebellion against power, as a righting of some historical wrong as old as Shakespeare’s Shylock, as noble as Robin Hood taking from the rich to give to the poor.

It’s why the Holocaust is the last acceptable reference to antisemitism because Jews were so powerless in the face of Nazi jugernaught; needing to be saved by white Christian soldiers who came nobeley to their aid. It also why antisemitism mascarading as Anti-Zionism is acceptable, because Israel is a symbol of Jewish power and power even when necessary to defend your people and your land is suspect at best; pure evil in the eyes of those less powerful.

Understanding the root causes of Jew Hatred is of absolutely no comfort or consolation; and the CBC reporter doesn’t want to hear any of that anyway. She wants a nice sound bite, “isn’t it comforting to know who turned in poor Anne Frank and her family after all these years?”

No it’s not, it points to the extreme and unimaginable circumstances Jews were put in during that time, where the only way to save their families was to turn on each other. The Hunger Games in real life.

Nor is it comforting to see police cars parked outside synagogues on the High Holy Days and guards at the synagogue doors every Shabbat. It’s not comforting, churches don’t have them, mosques don’t have them. Only synagogues only Jews. What would be comforting would be to live in a society where such things were not accepted as necessary for Jews to pray in a free society. What would be comforting would be the world to be in shock and horror that Jews were attached in a synagogue in North America. But that’s not shocking and if no one dies it’s hardly news the next day.